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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001087

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SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTRY SNUFFS EBERT CENTER EVENT

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On the afternoon of October 4, the interior ministry quietly informed the Friedrich Ebert Center in Algiers that the political discussion it had organized for the following morning would not take place and "was not appreciated." The October 5 event, a debate on the 20th anniversary of the 1988 riots that led to the birth of multiparty politics in Algeria, was to have featured the participation of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH) along with prominent academics and political figures. Invited personally by President Bouteflika to work in Algeria during his visit to Germany in 2002, the Ebert Center has never been granted legal status and has come under increasing pressure from the government over the last year. The decision to cancel the October 5 event was made and delivered to Ebert's country director in the shadows, without any written notification or explanation provided. Since the government's near shut-down of the operations of the National Democratic Institute in 2006, the Ebert Center has been the most prominent foreign political NGO still active in Algiers. The Ebert Center's recent experiences makes it even less clear for Algerian civil society where the bounds of "acceptable" behavior lie. END SUMMARY.

JOSEF K, YOU ARE UNDER ARREST

¶2. (C) Armin Hasemann, country director of the Friedrich Ebert Center, told us on October 5 that at around 1500 the previous day, the center received a phone call from the interior ministry politely summoning Hasemann to report to a certain address an hour later. The caller gave no name. Hasemann complied and arrived at the non-descript gate of a compound affiliated with the interior ministry. A guard opened the gate and Hasemann was led towards a central building with a metal detector at its entrance. He was then instructed to proceed to the fifth floor, to an office he believed was called "Directorate of Civil Society," though he confided that he was not certain as everything was in Arabic, which he does not read well.

¶3. (C) In the fifth floor office, two polite officials greeted Hasemann and apologized "for wasting his time" and "all of the work he had put into his activities." They then informed him that the October 5 seminar, already heavily publicized, would not be taking place as "it was not appreciated." Hasemann asked for reasons, an official letter, and the contact information for his two interlocutors. They provided him nothing and were apologetic but firm, saying their job was simply to deliver the message. The officials had only the contact information for

Hasemann's predecessor, who left a year ago, and asked him for a cell phone number "so that they could more easily contact him in the future." Hasemann told us that the interior ministry always communicates with the Ebert Center via telephone or verbal messages, since a letter would "appear to acknowledge we have some kind of status here that we have never been granted."

EBERT IN THE SPOTLIGHT

14. (C) The diplomat who handles the civil society portfolio at the German embassy in Algiers explained to us on October 5 that since Hasemann took over as head of the Ebert Center in 2007, elements of the Algerian government have "used his tenure" as an excuse to put pressure on the center and "suffocate it." Much as the National Democratic Institute found in late 2006 that it could no longer obtain visas, the Ebert Center has faced a growing number of "strange reactions" from local partners over the past year, the diplomat explained. Algerian organizations "appear to have been warned" not to cooperate with the center. Hasemann said that so far his center has not faced difficulties with obtaining visas, but he explained that most of Ebert's programming involves Algerian participants. The center's goal is simply to offer a space to debate while making sure "we never take a position on anything," to allow Algerians to engage in political debate. Our German embassy contact joked that he was jealous of Hasemann's ministry meeting, "since we have been trying to meet those people for years" to address civil society issues.

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15. (C) The German diplomat added that Hasemann has been "more active" but not, in his view, more provocative than his predecessor. Ebert was the subject of a vigorous debate in the Algerian press immediately following an economic conference it hosted on September 27. During the conference, an Algerian economist cited the National Office of Statistics' 2007 unemployment figure of 13.8 percent. The figure, which remains on the ONS website, was markedly higher than one cited in the press by Sidi Said, the president of the General Worker's Union (UGTA), Algeria's largest (and most government-linked) labor union. Said, who was invited to participate in the Ebert Center event on September 27 but did not attend, responded by publicly criticizing the center for interference in Algeria's internal affairs and fostering debate he labeled "unproductive." Headlines in the days that followed took sides, Hasemann noted, with many coming down in defense of Ebert's role as providing a forum and not responsible for the views of those who participated. "In this respect," Hasemann shrugged, "perhaps we succeeded in provoking a larger debate than we had anticipated."

CIVIL SOCIETY SUFFOCATING

16. (C) In contrast to Hasemann, who said Ebert's policy is simply to issue a press release with its reaction and refrain from press interviews, the LADDH blasted the government publicly at an October 5 press conference that replaced the planned Ebert Center event. LADDH president Mustapha Bouchachi and president emeritus Ali Yahia Abdenour denounced the cancellation of the conference, particularly on the occasion of the 1988 riots, "an event which marked a turning point in the fight for freedom." They accused the government of refusing to allow the organization of peaceful events to evaluate 20 years of Algeria's democratic experience. Kamel Daoud, a member of the LADDH executive board, visited us the afternoon of October 5 and told us he was certain the authorities knew that their record 20 years later had not lived up to the 1988 ideals. Daoud said that the LADDH was fortunate to have legal status, but that civil society as a whole "was suffocating" because of restrictions on freedom of association. Initially, Daoud said that the LADDH board

members believed they were the target of the interior ministry action, but after further discussion they realized that Ebert was the primary target, with the LADDH as one of many victims "who just need a forum for discussion." Abdenour told the press that, in a country of over 2 million square kilometers, "we cannot even have 50 square meters" to discuss Algerian issues.

COMMENT: NO FINGERPRINTS

17. (C) As it has done before with NDI and other organizations, the interior ministry has been careful not to leave a paper trail and not even to provide the Ebert Center any official channel for coordination and follow-up. By withholding legal status from domestic and foreign NGOs alike, the ministry is better able to control and influence their activities. We do not know who actually made the decision to cancel the October 5 event or why, and neither do the employees of the Ebert Center. Hasemann said that without any official clarification, he was "completely unsure" of what the center could do in the future, and even whether his children would be able to finish the school year in Algiers. He said the center intended to continue its planned series of discussions in the months ahead, absent any interior ministry instructions to the contrary. The LADDH's Abdenour noted glumly that the Ebert Center case represented "a significant regression, the likes of which we cannot find anywhere else in the region." Algerians, he said, are forced to meet abroad simply to discuss their own issues.

PEARCE